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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that the child welfare, education, and judicial systems are uniquely positioned to support the improvement of educational outcomes for youth in out-of-home care, the Child Welfare League of America and the National Council for Juvenile and Family Court Judges convened a symposium in 2002 to initiate a dialogue among the child welfare, judicial, and education fields and to build consensus about improving the educational outcomes for youth in care. This report summarizes the findings of this symposium, and includes: (1) the keynote address delivered by a former youth in care; (2) findings of a survey of key informants in child welfare, education, and judicial fields; (3) examples of three promising programs and practices that may improve youths' educational outcomes; (4) education of youth in care from the child welfare, education, and judicial perspectives; (5) the creation of a national agenda for the improvement of educational outcomes for youth in care based on the work of cross-discipline teams; and (6) recommendations for the child welfare, educational, and judicial systems to inform practice, program, and policy. (Contains 20 references.) (KB)

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Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care

Symposium Summary Report

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Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care

Symposium Summary Report

Elisabeth Yu, Pamela Day, and Millicent Williams

Child Welfare League of America
Washington, DC

The Child Welfare League of America is the nation's oldest and largest membership-based child welfare organization. We are committed to engaging people everywhere in promoting the well-being of children, youth, and their families, and protecting every child from harm.

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Contents

Acknowledgments v

Executive Summary ix

Introduction xv

Keynote Address 1

What We Are Learning 5

Examples of Promising Programs and Practices 13

Views from the Field 17

Developing a National Agenda 23

Recommendations and Conclusion 29

References 33

About the Contributors 35

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Executive Summary

This report is a product of the *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care* project, a collaboration between the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Permanency Planning for Children Department (PPCD), with support from the Marguerite Casey Foundation and technical assistance from Casey Family Programs. This project seeks to increase the capacity of child welfare staff, judges, and educators to assist young people in meeting their education and transition goals.

Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care: A National Collaboration summarized the educational experiences and placement stability of youth in care and their effects on successful transitions to self-sufficiency (Yu, Day, & Williams, 2002). It described a scenario for children and youth in the child welfare system that is not promising. Youth in care repeat grades or do not complete their high school education at all. Children and youth in care experience placement instability, often resulting in school instability. They face barriers when trying to enroll in schools, are often missing health and education records, and do not receive the educational services they need. Lacking a good education, youth are limited in their options for employment and their ability to afford safe housing and maintain the health services they received while in care.

In light of this, CWLA and PPCD convened a symposium, bringing together experts from the child welfare, judicial, and education fields. The symposium initiated a dialogue between these fields and built consensus about improving the educational outcomes for youth in care. From discussions with fellow experts within and across disciplines, symposium participants developed recommendations to support positive educational outcomes for youth in care. This report summarizes the proceedings of the symposium, including:

- The keynote address delivered by a former youth in care;
- Results of CWLA's and PPCD's surveys of key informants in the child welfare, education, and judicial fields;
- Examples of three promising programs and practices that were featured at the symposium;
- Education of youth in care from the child welfare, education, and judicial perspectives;
- A national agenda based on the work of cross-discipline teams; and
- Recommendations for the child welfare, education, and the judicial systems to inform practice, program, and policy.

Keynote Address

The symposium began with a keynote address delivered by Adam J. Cornell, an attorney and former youth in care who experienced numerous placements, school changes, and failed adoptions. He related his personal experience of the importance of education in helping young people in care realize their dreams. Mr. Cornell offered recommendations for the courts, state and federal agencies, schools, families, communities, nonprofit organizations, and children in care themselves to improve the educational outcomes of youth in care.

What We Are Learning

In preparation for the symposium, CWLA and PPCD interviewed key informants in the judicial, education, and child welfare fields. The findings were reported at the symposium. PPCD conducted telephone interviews with judges participating in the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges' National Model Courts project. PPCD designed the interviews to assess judges' impressions of the importance of the educational needs of youth in care, as well as identify any promising programs or practices aimed at the issue. Nineteen Model Court lead judges participated in the telephone interviews.

CWLA also conducted telephone interviews of key informants in the child welfare and education systems to identify and describe programs, practices, and policy initiatives for the educational needs of youth in care. CWLA conducted structured telephone interviews with 20 key informants.

Examples of Promising Programs and Practices

Presenters highlighted three promising programs at the symposium: the Beech Acres Education Advocacy Center, the Foster Youth Services Program, and Benchmark Permanency Hearings in Chicago's Model Court.

Views from the Field

Participants in the symposium worked in small groups according to their field of expertise. Each group discussed their role in meeting the educational needs of youth in care, collaborative approaches to meeting these needs, gaps in knowledge that would inform practice and a national agenda, and strategies for improving educational outcomes for youth in care.

Overall, each group recognized its unique part in supporting young people in meeting their educational needs. Although there is a lack of information and understanding between systems, the groups generated promising strategies for their respective fields.

Developing a National Agenda

Symposium participants worked in groups with other experts across disciplines to build a collective understanding of the educational needs of youth in care and make recommendations about the resources, collaborative networks, and strategies needed so that national, state, and local organizations can work on this issue.

The workgroups envisioned a future in which children and youth in care are supported to reach their optimal educational potential as an integral part of overall well-being. To become well-rounded individuals who are capable of achieving their goals, children and youth in care should be provided with comprehensive learning opportunities. They should be supported by coordinated efforts, not just by schools, child welfare agencies, and the courts, but by their broader community.

The workgroups stressed that the following resources are needed:

- Tools and information, such as publications of best and promising practices, state-specific judicial "bench books," a judicial checklist of education questions and transition issues, practice tools, evaluations of educational outcomes, reviews of available research, and an online information resource center;

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- Ongoing cross-system training on education and youth in care and training for the judiciary, educators, and child welfare staff to promote positive youth development;
- Funding from private, state, and federal agencies; and
- Supportive laws and related strategies, such as legal requirements that are consistent across systems, information on federal mandates about education and child welfare laws, use of educational surrogates, and lawsuits to spur change.

In addition, the workgroups suggested groups and individuals who can play an important role in improving educational outcomes for youth. They discussed community groups, mentors and tutors for youth in care, national and state agencies, advocacy groups, governors' commissions, national resource centers, and symposium participants. The workgroups also provided examples of possible collaborative work. Finally, the workgroups offered suggestions to national, state, and local organizations on ways to promote the national educational agenda for youth in care.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The following recommendations, based on the CWLA and PPCD survey results and the themes that emerged from the symposium, summarize what needs to be done to improve educational outcomes for youth in care:

- Child welfare, education, and the judiciary should make the well-being of youth in care a clear priority and should encourage youth in care to succeed, obtain postsecondary education, and participate in developing their case plans. All disciplines working with youth should adhere to the philosophy and practice the principles of positive youth development.
- Systems should collaborate to improve educational outcomes for youth in care by sharing records, memoranda of understanding, and court orders. Cross-agency partnerships should be developed by engaging leaders and stakeholders from other systems and forming joint committees.
- The education, judicial, and child welfare fields should fulfill their respective responsibilities in ensuring the educational progress of youth in care.
- The education system should facilitate records transfers, provide timely educational assessments, use all school personnel to encourage youth, and include other systems in school settings.

- The judicial system should assume responsibility for overseeing the educational progress of children in care throughout the life of the case, form a model court advisory committee, produce a bench book for judges, and try to maintain each youth in the same school throughout his or her case. Judges should meet regularly with decisionmakers on state and local boards of education.

- The child welfare system should involve families in service delivery, maintain stability in children's lives, and provide courts with accurate educational information. Agencies should reduce caseloads and plan for the transition to independence for all youth. The system should also develop a database of health and education records for children in care.

- Training between and across disciplines should be developed and widely implemented to improve the capacity of the systems to meet the educational needs of youth in care, including information on laws such as the Foster Care Independence Act.

- Advocacy for youth in care should raise awareness about their educational rights and needs. Educational advocacy positions should be created and legislation that supports higher educational attainment for youth should be promoted. Also, a public awareness campaign that increases community awareness of youth in care should be implemented.

- A comprehensive approach that includes resources, tools, and strategies for change should be developed. This includes allocating resources and staff to collaborate with other systems, compiling information on promising practices and programs, and recruiting community volunteers for tutoring.

Introduction

Education is a crucial element in an individual's ability to live independently. Education increases one's prospects of earning a living wage that can meet basic needs, such as food, clothing, adequate housing, and health care. Beyond helping to ensure minimal subsistence, education increases the likelihood that a young person in care will become a self-sufficient adult.

Child safety and permanency have been the primary focus of the child welfare system. Child welfare law and policy, including the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA, P.L. 105-89) and the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1996 (CAPTA, P.L. 104-235), stress that the health and safety of children is the paramount concern when making decisions about preserving and reunifying families. Whether the placement arrangement also will meet the child's educational needs is usually not a major consideration (Joiner, 2001; Weinberg, 1997).

For youth who are transitioning from the child welfare system, education is their best hope of becoming independent adults (Coeyman, 2001). The literature confirms, however, that children and youth in care are at high risk for educational failure. Studies find that a range of 26% to 40% of youth in care repeat one or more grades (Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service [ESMSPS], 1999; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, in press). In addition, 30% to 96% of students in care were below grade level in reading or math (Haymes & Vidal de Haymes, 2000; Seyfried, Pecora, Downs, Levine, & Emerson, 2000). Some studies have stated that 37% to 80% of youth had not completed their high school education even after they exited care (Avery, 2001; Bussey et al., 2000; Cook, 1994; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 1998; McMillen & Tucker, 1999). Of the total number of children in care, 30% to 41% receive special education services, although this number may be underreported (Courtney, Piliavin, & Grogan-Kaylor, 1995; ESMSPS and the National Resource Center for Youth Services, 1998, 2000; Goerge, Voorhis, Grant, Casey, & Robinson, 1992).

Changes in foster care placement often cause changes in school placement for youth in care. School performance suffers as youth experience school disruption. Students in care are forced to continually adjust to new curricula, teachers, academic demands, group norms, and school peers. As a result of placement disruptions, students in care are less likely to receive timely assessments, obtain continuous educational services, and have accurate school records.

Additional barriers to educational achievement exist for these youth. The lack of collaboration between child welfare agencies, schools, and the courts can hamper a youth's educational progress, because the systems do not systematically share information or plan in a coordinated way. Child welfare workers may not have the health and education records needed to enroll students in school. The school itself can resist or delay a student's enrollment, fail to recognize the existence of an individualized education plan (IEP), provide a lower quality of education, or fail to provide a social environment that is accepting of students in care. Finally, judges may not routinely inquire about a youth's school progress unless educational difficulties come to their attention.

Each system is uniquely positioned to support the improvement of educational outcomes for youth in care. For example, child welfare agencies can train workers to make school stability a priority when making placement decisions. Schools can expedite prompt enrollment and transfer of school records, including IEPs. The judicial system can engage CASAs and guardians ad litem as educational advocates for youth.

As part of the *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care* project, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Permanency Planning for Children Department (PPCD), in consultation with Casey Family Programs, planned a national symposium, funded by the Marguerite Casey Foundation. Recognizing the importance of each system in ensuring positive educational outcomes for youth in care, child welfare, judicial, and education experts took an initial step toward building understanding regarding ways that the three fields can support the education of young people in care, made recommendations for policy improvements, and increased national attention to the importance of improving education for youth in care.

The symposium was convened on February 8, 2002, in Washington, D.C. The 61 participants represented the judiciary, the education and child welfare systems, research and policy groups, foundations, and national organizations. Participants

- reviewed recent findings of CWLA's Key Informant and PPCD's Model Court Judges surveys,
- shared strategies for assisting youth in achieving educational goals,
- raised issues they have encountered as they work toward improving educational outcomes for youth,
- made recommendations to inform the national agenda, and
- built a shared commitment to working together to improve outcomes for young people in care.

Sarah Gesiriech, from the White House Office of Domestic Policy Council, delivered special remarks on the current Administration's commitment to education. She outlined the Administration's proposals to increase funds for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), focus attention on an Early Head Start initiative, and create education and training vouchers as a part of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program.

Keynote Address

Adam J. Cornell

Throughout our nation's history, various groups of citizens have struggled for access to education. And not only access to education, but equality of education. Once the privilege of a few, America slowly began to come of age. Over time, women, African Americans, the poor, and others earned the right to elementary, postsecondary, and higher education.

Much has been done in the area of education, but much more remains to be done. Some of the old barriers persist, and there are new groups who struggle with old challenges. And new difficulties have also come to the fore, which must be addressed with strength, collaboration, and vision.

For America's foster children, the quest for access and equality of education is fraught with unusual obstacles—dissimilar in many ways to the obstacles of the groups that have come before them. The complexities of this challenge underlie the evident difficulties in bringing about positive and lasting change.

For instance, foster children are not a discrete and insular minority unto themselves. This is not a group that is easily identifiable; in fact, many hope not to be identified and take neither pride nor promise in their status as foster children.

Foster children themselves lack political power or influence. Due in part to their desire to remain anonymous, but mostly due to their status as children, they are disenfranchised by a political and economic system that values constituencies with voting power and monetary muscle. Thankfully, there have been individuals and groups with a voice who have spoken for our most vulnerable children, but even their shouts often fall upon deaf ears in our statehouses and national government.

Finally, rather than a history plagued by an affirmative denial of education, America's foster children suffer due to the willful blindness of a country that, by and large, has rarely believed that they could be well educated.

That is our plague.

But, as Albert Camus said about the plague, "It helps men and women to rise above themselves." And that is why we are here today, this 8th day of February 2002. To finds ways to partner with each other for foster children. To help them—and us—to rise above ourselves.

Today is an experiment. For your willingness to embrace this cause, I thank you. We are at the dawn of a new movement. I am very proud to share this moment with you.

I am both proud and thankful because I know how priceless and necessary education is to a foster child. I spent much of my early life in the care and custody of the state. After more than a dozen public schools, numerous foster homes, two failed adoptions—the final one which ended in the suicide of my adopted father shortly before my high school graduation—education is what saved me.

The day I graduated from college was the proudest moment of my life. Just a short way down the street, on a sunny May afternoon in front of Healy Hall, I graduated from Georgetown University in 1995. There is little I remember about that day save for the red, white, and blue bunting and the final admonition to us all before we were dismissed as graduates. Father Lawton, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, remarked to us in parting, "Go forth, you sons and daughters of Georgetown." It was the day I found a family.

Must of you are defined by your family. "I am the brother of John" or "I am the mother of Sarah," one might say. Your family is the unchanging reference point in which you navigate your life. It is your anchor to windward.

Foster children often lack the fixed reckoning of that definition. I did. The day I graduated from Georgetown was the day I knew I had something that no one could ever take away from me. It was two small letters after my name, but those letters have made all the difference in my life.

College was more than an academic learning environment, it was also a social environment. It was a place where I laughed, cried, and found joy in the company of my peers and professors. It was a place where I learned about breaking up and still being friends. It was a place where I learned to become a man.

I was not the only one who benefited from my experiences at college. My friends, classmates, and peers also learned from me. That's right. The marketplace of ideas was enriched by the unique perspective that I brought to campus. I undoubtedly challenged the stereotypes that people may have had of foster children or foster care. I also had a thing or two to say about politics, God, and the history of jazz.

I didn't achieve alone. I achieved because of the efforts and care of so many who took the time to listen to me. They were teachers, foster parents, social workers, Boys & Girls Club mentors and classmates.

Our effort requires the involvement of a constellation of people and organizations. Among them are courts, state and federal agencies, schools, foster and biological families, community and national nonprofit organizations, and finally, foster children. I would like to briefly discuss the role each of these groups can play in this movement. This is, of course, not meant to be exhaustive, rather, it is meant to catalyze your thinking here today.

Courts: We need judges who drag preteen and teenage kids into court to see their faces and ask them questions about their goals and dreams and whether they are going to school. We need to revitalize judges who, after long and often interminable days, find inspiration and energy from successful foster children.

State and federal agencies: Collaboration and cooperation among state and federal agencies must exist. These entities must disseminate information to individuals and organizations on the front lines of child welfare. Additionally, foster children must be a budget priority. Often the first programs to get cut in tough budgetary times, the government must not turn their backs on the very children in whom they have a vested interest. They are the parent. They must step up to the challenge.

Schools: Educational stability for foster children has got to be priority number one. The relationships that children have with their teachers and peers are often the most restorative. School can be a safe harbor, a place of refuge, a calm in a storm. In the state of Washington, one political leader has proposed legislation that would require children removed from their homes to remain in their home school for the first 60 days of care. We need more creative solutions like that.

Foster families and biological families: Return to home is the goal. Both foster families and biological families must strive to, as best as possible, keep children focused on school. It is too easy for foster children to get a free pass from academic accountability. Those closest to our foster children may have the greatest impact. They must support and encourage high school graduation and, where appropriate, college graduation.

Community and national nonprofits: Community and national nonprofits have stepped in the gap for foster children. Supporting child welfare efforts has been a priority for many of these groups. So long as they continue to be supported by the generosity of public and private contributions, they will be able to continue their good work. I also encourage nonprofits to rigorously evaluate their successes. Results matter to funders.

Foster children: Self-advocacy means more than greater self-esteem and self-confidence for America's foster children. It means better programs. Foster children must be involved at every level of advocacy for greater educational outcomes. In the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages, their voice matters.

For years, we have focused only on protection of foster children. Protection must be priority number one, but we must do more. We must ensure access to education and provide equality of that education. We ask more of almost every other group in America. Today, we must begin to ask more of ourselves and our foster children when it comes to their education. We will meet this challenge.

This effort is ultimately about a dream. A dream that a foster child will rise above their circumstance and realize the dormant potential to be educated. The beginning of the end of this plague starts here with you.

What We Are Learning

To learn more about educational issues for youth in care and to identify promising programs and practices in preparation for the symposium, CWLA and PPCD identified and interviewed key informants in the judicial, education, and child welfare fields. At the symposium, PPCD presented the results from interviews with the Model Court judges, and CWLA highlighted findings from its survey of key informants in the child welfare and education systems.[1]

Model Court Judges Telephone Interview Findings

Sophia Gatowski

A major component of the collaborative project between PPCD and CWLA involved identifying and describing promising efforts to address the educational needs of youth in foster care. As a first step in gathering such information, research staff at PPCD conducted telephone interviews with judges participating in the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges' National Model Courts project, funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The purpose was to learn about innovative practices and programs aimed at addressing the educational needs of youth in care that might exist in each Model Court jurisdiction. The interviewers recorded Model Court judges' impressions of the overall importance of this topic for the judiciary as well as their knowledge of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which is targeted to improving outcomes and services for young people in care and as they transition out of care. They also identified appropriate people to contact for additional program information.

1 For more information on the results from the Model Courts survey and from PPCD's key informant survey, see Litchfield, Gatowski, and McKissick (2002).

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Method

The 23 model courts participating in PPCD's National Model Court project represent a variety of rural and urban jurisdictions and court and agency structures. Each has a designated "lead judge" who directs model court reform efforts in each jurisdiction.

PPCD completed telephone interviews with 19 of the Model Court lead judges, which lasted approximately 45 minutes on average.[2] PPCD sent follow-up questionnaires to individuals identified by the judges as good sources of detailed information about the specific programs, practices, and policies they had identified during the course of their interview.

Because the focus of this phase of the project was on identifying promising practices, the researchers hypothesized that lead judges would be knowledgeable about educational change efforts planned or currently under way. Surveying judges was also a first step in gathering information about whether this issue is on judges' minds. With additional funding, the ultimate aim is to gather information about this topic from a nationally representative sample of judges. Such a sample would provide baseline data from judges who are potentially less familiar with this issue and system reform efforts.

Findings

Importance Ascribed to Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care

Of the judges interviewed, 89% (n = 17) believed that judges do have a distinct role to play in ensuring that the educational needs of youth in care are met. They said the following:

> It's part of protecting best interests.
>
> Judges must take advantage of [their] jurisdiction...to ensure that agencies are responding to all needs, including education.
>
> Education will help the child's self-esteem, help break the cycle, and will eventually aid in the reduction of caseloads.
>
> The same amount of attention needs to be paid to educational needs as to any other service provided by the court.

Of the judges, 84% (n = 16) believed that the completion of a high school diploma was very important for youth who are under the jurisdiction of the court. One said, "A high school diploma is a necessary tool for children to survive and be successful in today's society."

2 Three judges' schedules prevented them from participating in the telephone interviews. One judge declined to participate. Response rate = 83%.

Perhaps more interestingly, 63% of the judges interviewed ($n = 12$) felt that a focus on postsecondary education was very important for youth in foster care—that striving beyond high school to attend college, or some other post–high school specialized education program, should be part of educational preparation and initiatives for youth in care. One said, "The same opportunities should be offered to children in foster care that are offered to children outside of foster care."

Bench Practice

With respect to bench practice, 74% of the judges ($n = 14$) reported that they made a specific inquiry regarding educational needs before disposition. This inquiry was made irrespective of whether or not a specifically identified educational issue or problem was raised. These predisposition inquiries from the bench were described as "routine" questions regarding education. Judges reported that they inquired primarily about:

- school attendance;
- location of school relative to placement;
- whether educational needs have been or need to be assessed; and
- whether any identified special needs are being met.

As one noted, "It's our responsibility to inquire and make certain that educational needs, as other needs, are being met."

Of the judges, 53% ($n = 10$) reported that they made routine specific inquiries about the educational needs of youth in foster care postdisposition. They described this inquiry as questions regarding educational placement stability, special needs, and assessments. The remaining judges reported that these inquiries were more likely to be made only if specific problems had been identified and raised during the course of the hearing.

Judicial Impressions Regarding Practice

Of the judges, 63% ($n = 12$) reported that in their opinion, child welfare agencies do not pay enough attention to educational needs of youth in care. The judges noted that "with limited resources available, [the agency's] focus is on basic survival, safety, and health," and that as a result, "education often takes a back seat." "When the system is overwhelmed and without resources...education often becomes an afterthought."

Of the judges, 32% ($n = 6$) reported that they are frequently not provided with enough information to properly assess whether the educational

needs of youth are being met. These judges noted that "reports are infrequent and typically submitted only if there are serious problems," and that "information received is very general," and reports are "typically superficial."

Sixty-eight percent of the judges ($n = 13$) believed that the frequency with which the court is provided information about a youth's educational status was not dependent on the age of the child. Most agreed that such information is provided to the court regardless of the age of the child, and is based on the child's needs and problems. Nevertheless, 8 of the 19 judges (42%) stated that the specific type of information received does depend on the age of the child (e.g., "information regarding educational assessments is more frequently provided with younger children," and "information about job-related education is typically received only when youth are about to transition out of the system").

Judges' Understanding of the Chafee Act

The Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA), which established the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, ensures that juvenile and family courts can directly affect children and youth in care. Courts can hold child welfare agencies accountable to provide independent living services, as well as permanency services, as part of its case plan for children and youth in care. Because of the role that courts have in implementing FCIA, PPCD asked judges about their familiarity with FCIA.

Of the judges, 53% ($n = 10$) rated themselves as having little or no knowledge of the Chafee Independence Program services. Of the remaining nine judges, eight reported having "some" knowledge, and one judge reported having "a great deal of knowledge." "Any information about how other jurisdictions are using it and interpreting it to benefit their youth would be appreciated," one said.

Promising Practices

Promising practices identified by the judges included:

- educational advocacy/rights programs,
- educational assessment centers,
- mentoring programs,
- educational/school board liaisons in court,
- truancy diversion programs,
- benchmark permanency hearings,

- projects focused specifically on the needs of girls, and
- programs focused on the developmental needs of children (early intervention).

Challenges to Reform Efforts

Challenges to reform identified by the judges included:

- confidentiality and sharing of information across systems,
- working with multiple school districts,
- lack of resources for programming and for program staff, and
- lack of communication between systems regarding the importance of this issue.

Some strategies identified by the judges to address these challenges to successful reform included:

- having educational representatives participate in court improvement efforts and including them in court improvement committee membership,
- holding regular meetings with the decisionmakers on the board of education, and
- working with each system to develop formal protocols regarding confidentiality and the sharing of information about educational needs.

Other comments were:

> Bring them to the table...let them know their ideas are respected.
>
> All of us in child welfare, including judges, need to realize that if education is important and valued for our children at home, it is more important for our children in care...if we expect them to be productive members of our society, we need to partner together and share responsibility for giving them the right tools to be able to do so.

Child Welfare and Educational Informants Telephone Interview Findings

Millicent Williams and Margo Coleman

The overarching goal of the survey of key informants in the child welfare and education systems was to identify and describe program, practice, and policy initiatives aimed at meeting the educational needs of youth in care.

Method

Key Informants

CWLA identified key informants in the child welfare and educational systems based on the informants' knowledge and expertise regarding the educational needs of youth in care.

Survey Development

CWLA, in conjunction with PPCD, developed questionnaires to standardize the information obtained from informants. The questionnaires contained similar questions to facilitate comparisons across key informants in the child welfare, education, and judicial systems. CWLA developed the questionnaires into a structured interview survey. The survey included questions on program components, funding sources, and implementation barriers.

Survey Implementation

CWLA project staff conducted structured telephone interviews with 20 key informants in child welfare and education. The interviews were approximately 45 minutes long. At the conclusion of the interview, the staff member asked each informant to identify additional individuals and promising practices that could inform the project activities.

Types of Programs and Policy Initiatives Surveyed

After conducting the interviews, it became apparent that the information on efforts to improve the educational outcomes fell into two broad categories: (1) programs, and (2) policy initiatives. Programs provide direct services to youth in care. CWLA staff interviewed 11 key informants from geographically diverse areas about their programs. The participants provided information on 12 programs that were evenly divided between public and private agencies.

Policy initiatives were aimed at affecting policies and practices to meet the educational needs of youth in care. The staff interviewed seven key informants about eight policy initiatives. These diverse initiatives included committees, task forces, governmental departments, and training curriculum protocols.

Information collected during the survey was not always pertinent to each category. Therefore, the findings of this survey are reported separately for programs and policy initiatives.

Findings

Factors Important to Agency Mission

The interviewers asked program informants to rank six factors in order of importance to the mission of the agency. Safety and permanency were ranked first and second, respectively. Rankings were mixed for the remaining factors—ASFA requirements, health and mental health services, stability of placement, and visitation.

Characteristics of Youth Served by Programs

The youth served by the programs were diverse. All programs served older youth. In addition, although all programs did not serve the same age groups, there was representation of services from preschool through postsecondary years. The majority of programs were only for youth in care. The respondents gave diverse methods and reasons for referring youth to the programs.

Funding Sources

Interviewers asked informants to identify all funding sources for the identified programs and initiatives. Funding sources differed between the program and policy initiatives. Half of the program informants and one-third of the policy informants identified state and corporate funding. In addition, half of the policy informants identified the federal government as a funding source.

Evaluation of Program Effectiveness

Many of the programs included a formal component to assess their effectiveness in improving educational outcomes. Because many of these programs are relatively new, however, the evaluations are still in progress.

Interviewers asked key informants about the components that are particularly important to the overall success of the programs. Both program and policy informants identified advocacy and system collaboration. In addition, program informants also identified adequate funding as a key ingredient to the success of their programs.

Collaboration Efforts

Many of the identified programs and policy initiatives are the result of collaborative efforts. The majority of the programs and about one-third of the policy initiatives included collaborations between the child welfare and educational systems.

Challenges to Programs and Policy Initiatives

Many of the programs and policy initiatives are in the early phases of implementation. Some of them address barriers faced by youth in care, but others are too early in their implementation to have much information on challenges encountered when addressing the educational success of youth in care. When participants identified barriers, they indicated the lack of funding and system collaboration.

Strategies to Address Challenges

A range of strategies was identified for addressing challenges. Both program and policy informants indicated that coordination of systems, communication, and training were effective. Program informants identified the presence of an educational specialist, and policy informants identified the need for increased awareness as useful strategies in addressing barriers to educational success faced by youth in care.

Policy Changes to Address Educational Needs of Youth

Interviewers asked informants to give their opinions regarding policy changes needed to address the educational needs of youth in care. Both program and policy informants indicated that there is a need for funding changes so that funding is more flexible and/or portable. In addition, program informants identified mandated positive educational outcomes, collaboration (particularly mandated), and centralized data tracking as important policy changes.

Conclusion

A number of programs and policy initiatives across the nation are addressing the educational needs of youth in care. The findings from the survey showed that collaboration between systems, advocacy efforts, and adequate funding are all important factors in meeting the educational needs of youth in care.

Examples of Promising Programs and Practices

The following are summaries of three promising programs and practices that were featured at the symposium. Bryan Brown highlighted the Beech Acres Education Advocacy Center, which ensures access to education for children in care. Tracy Fried presented the work of the Foster Youth Services Program, which improves educational outcomes for youth in group care. Finally, the Honorable Patricia Martin Bishop focused on benchmark permanency hearings aimed at supporting young people as they work toward transitioning out of care.

Beech Acres Education Advocacy Center

In 2000, Beech Acres, a family services agency in greater Cincinnati, received funding from the KnowledgeWorks Foundation to establish the Beech Acres Education Advocacy Center. The center's mission is to ensure access to appropriate educational services for children in substitute care, thereby improving their achievements and outcomes. The center provides resources for parents, schools, and private and public agencies to improve educational success for children in out-of-home care. Children who are having difficulty educationally are eligible to receive center services. The center's service area covers four southwest counties in Ohio.

Specifically, the center provides the following services:

- Training to teachers, social services professionals, birthparents, and foster parents, to make them effective advocates for children in out-of-home care. The center is also working with the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services to revise curricula for surrogate parent training.

- Consultation services to foster parents and child welfare staff to resolve educational problems. In addition, classroom observation and individual coaching services are available for teachers, support staff, and other school professionals.
- An advocate to represent a child in the care of a foster parent or child-serving agency to resolve school-related problems.
- A partnership with foster parents and other caregivers to advocate for public policy at state and local levels that meet the special educational needs of children in out-of-home care.
- Research and evaluation of educational services to children it serves to ensure that services are available, appropriate, and timely. Research is also conducted to inform the center in advancing public policy and best practices to improve educational opportunities for children in out-of-home care.

Foster Youth Services Program

Foster Youth Services (FYS) focuses on improving the educational outcomes for youth in care, ages 4 to 21, who are residing in licensed group homes. FYS represents a partnership among San Diego County's leading service providers to youth in care. FYS improves the outcomes of youth in care through the development and implementation of a model health and education multi-information system. Program goals include ensuring that youth in care have access to appropriate educational services in the least restrictive environment, ensuring the transfer of current health and education records in a timely manner, reducing discipline problems, improving school attendance by reducing truancy and dropout rates, and improving academic achievement. The key components of the program are the following:

- The FYS Advisory Committee (FYSAC) provides guidance and support in the development and implementation of FYS. FYSAC is composed of county leaders and key decisionmakers from school districts, the juvenile court, the probation department, the Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA), advocacy agencies, CFP, community colleges, and group home providers.
- An interagency agreement, developed by FYSAC, supported by a court order, and signed by the leaders of school districts, group home providers, the probation department, and HHSA, articulates each agency's roles and responsibilities based on legal mandates as related to education.

- The FYS Network, a process of communication supported by the interagency agreement, clearly delineates the systemic transfer of health and education records between all agencies involved in the education of youth in care.

- The Foster Youth Information System is a countywide database that maintains demographic information, placement information, and health and education records to ensure that appropriate educational placement and services are provided to youth in care.

In addition to facilitating the transfer of health and education information, FYS and partnering agencies provide educational assessments, tutoring, mentoring, counseling, transitional services and vocational training, emancipation services, and training for independent living. An FYS educational liaison supports schools in placing youth in the appropriate school, locates school records for youth, helps youth understand school credits, graduation, or general equivalency diploma (GED) requirements, helps youth understand what services are available to enrich the educational experience, and plans for the youth's future.

Benchmark Permanency Hearings

In Illinois, permanency hearings are held 12 months after a child comes into custody and every 6 months thereafter. Judge Patricia Martin Bishop, Presiding Judge of the Child Protection Division in Chicago, began conducting benchmark permanency hearings for all youth in care. These hearings take place at age 14, age 16, and six months before case closure. These intensive hearings cover all aspects of the case. They are designed to support the young person and ensure that youth receive appropriate assessment and planning services. The hearings last for a minimum of two hours, and all parties involved in the youth's case must attend.

When the date for the benchmark permanency hearing is set, the caseworker is given a packet of information. The packet contains a protocol that clearly outlines the caseworker's responsibilities in preparing for the hearing. The caseworker must provide the youth with a special notice of the hearing and ensure that the young person will attend.

In addition, the youth is asked to identify a responsible adult that he or she can rely on and would like to have continued contact with in the future. The caseworker is responsible for inviting that person to attend the hearing.

A representative of the Chicago public schools is available for each benchmark permanency hearing to provide information about the youth's educational history and current information on enrollment and attendance. The representative also provides information about appropriate programs and services offered by the Chicago public schools and how to access those programs.

The benchmark permanency hearings ensure that by the time youth leave the child welfare system, they have a connection with an adult, an educational goal, and a way to address any mental health concerns, if needed.

Views from the Field

Symposium participants divided into three workgroups according to their field of interest: child welfare, judiciary, and education. Each workgroup discussed the following topics and shared their results with the entire group:

- role of the field in addressing the educational needs of youth in care (in day-to-day practice and at the local, state, and national levels),
- collaborative approaches that support efforts to address the educational needs of youth in care,
- gaps in knowledge and understanding that would inform practice and a national agenda, and
- successful strategies aimed at improving educational outcomes for youth in care.

Child Welfare

Participants in the child welfare workgroup recognized their important role in maintaining continuity and stability in a child's life. For children and youth to thrive educationally, they should experience continuity in their school placement.

The child welfare workgroup identified the following elements to maintaining continuity and stability for children in care:

- Conducting a higher level needs assessment. This would include identifying children's needs as soon as they enter care.
- Encouraging foster parents, adoptive parents, and birthparents to advocate for their children and youth's educational rights and ensure that their educational needs are being met.

- Ensuring that child welfare staff are educated on this issue and on how to work with the educational system.
- Identifying critical organizations and individuals, building working relationships with them, and maintaining effective communication.

Along with safety and permanency, child welfare agencies should concentrate on positive educational outcomes for youth in care. The workgroup recommended several collaborative approaches that would support their efforts:

- Collaborate on a higher level (e.g., state level) with schools and courts.
- Collaborate with staff and foster parent training divisions to ensure understanding of educational goals.
- Engage the primary educational agency to build understanding and collaboration with child welfare.
- Train foster parents to advocate for youth's educational goals.
- Engage kinship caregivers in the educational process.
- Provide an educational liaison and/or parent mentors to work with the schools and the child welfare agency.
- Provide regular feedback to the courts on each youth's well-being, including educational progress.

The child welfare workgroup reported major gaps in the understanding of workers and foster parents regarding the education system. Similarly, they felt that educators did not understand child welfare. The workgroup affirmed that continuity for children and youth in care, youth involvement in the educational planning process (individually and systemically), educator involvement, and judicial and child welfare knowledge of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program are areas that require improvement. Participants highlighted the need for relationships with other partners, such as mental health and Medicaid agencies.

Although the gaps in understanding across systems serving youth appear daunting, the child welfare workgroup suggested numerous strategies that child welfare could incorporate into practice to improve educational outcomes for youth in care:

- Develop and provide training for school administrators and teachers on child welfare and the unique needs of children and youth in care.

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- Use the EPSDT to conduct comprehensive assessments of children entering foster care.
- Provide training on ICPC requirements that affect educational opportunities for youth in care.
- Form a youth advisory committee to address this topic.
- Provide guidance on how to get people to the table, using data to pique people's interest and raise concerns.
- Develop mentoring programs for students, including educating mentors on the needs of children in care.
- Use collaborative or pooled funding.
- Hire individuals with vision.

Judiciary

Judges and court officers in the judicial workgroup endorsed the important role of the courts in making education a priority for all children. From the beginning of placement to the very end of a case, judges can take responsibility for the child's educational needs by ordering a complete educational assessment for every child who enters out-of-home care. Judges also can play a role in maintaining the child in the same school. Yet, they need help from other systems to accomplish this. Judges can play an important part in advocating a postsecondary degree as the first educational goal for youth, rather than automatically assuming that a GED or employment should be the first goal.

The judicial workgroup suggested the following collaborative approaches to support the court's efforts in addressing the educational needs of youth in care:

- Establish a model court advisory committee to study this issue.
- Develop memoranda of agreement and understanding between school boards, child welfare agencies, and the courts to share information.
- Provide training for court officers on the educational needs of youth in care.
- Designate an educational advocate to ensure the educational needs of children and youth are met.

The workgroup suggested that more information was needed about state and federal laws on the educational rights of children, possibly in the form of bench books or judicial checklists. Enforcement tools for judges to ensure that school districts are meeting children's educational needs would be helpful. Cross-training for all court participants on the educational needs of youth in care is also needed. Finally, confidentiality barriers between agencies, schools, and courts create a lack of understanding and prevent collaboration.

Participants suggested several strategies to successfully improve the education of youth in care:

- Participate in reciprocal training with child welfare agencies and school districts.
- Convene joint committees.
- Include foster parents in collaborative efforts.
- Give children a voice in the process (e.g., youth advisory committees).
- Reach out to educational leaders by bringing school representatives into the process and meeting with administrators in the schools.
- Use lawsuits to hold people accountable for the educational needs of children and youth in care.

Education

The education workgroup advocated a broader role for educators than previously envisioned. Beyond educating a child or youth in care, educators can nurture and support these children to advocate for themselves. Educators also can:

- Support professionals within their field by providing preservice and in-service training on child welfare to better prepare teachers for the children they are seeing in their classrooms.
- Encourage professional development such as active involvement with the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC; a consortium of state education agencies, higher education institutions, and national educational organizations dedicated to the reform of the education, licensing, and ongoing professional development of teachers).

- View the roles of all school personnel (i.e., secretary, teacher, administrator, nurse) as important in meeting the needs of children and youth in care.

- Support post–high school education such as vocational schools, community colleges, and universities for youth in care.

Collaborative approaches that would help educators address the needs of youth in care involve the development of a communication structure around the needs of the child, such as:

- Establish a protocol to facilitate the transfer and communication of information.

- Establish a Web-based, user-friendly database to store current and accurate health and education records.

- Share records among agencies.

- Develop clear role definitions among the constellation of players from each system.

- Receive judicial support for sharing information, such as court orders and case plan amendments.

The workgroup felt that educators lack understanding about the particular needs of students who are in foster care. They realize that the lack of communication and difficulty with record transfers is a major gap that hurts children. Educators also believed a gap exists in the broader community's awareness of and involvement in the lives of youth in care. Educators' lack of knowledge and understanding about the child welfare and judicial systems limits their ability to support the educational needs of youth in care. If educators are not currently looking at the educational progress of students in care, they will have to in the future. With the increased emphasis on student test scores and outcomes, educators will have to ensure that students in care, along with the rest of the student population, are meeting academic standards. To this end, educators need to know the laws and their roles and responsibilities in working with youth in care.

The education workgroup suggested the following strategies to support educators' efforts to address the educational needs of youth in care:

- Court orders allowing for sharing of information between child welfare agencies and schools.

- Educational advocacy and training for educators.
- Formal protocols for communication and transfer of records between the school, the agency, caregivers, parents, and the courts.
- Definition of the school liaison's role to ensure effective use by the school, caregiver, court, and agency.
- Flexible and blended funding to support different services or systems.
- Peer supports for new youth in care.
- Use of a community-school model.
- Availability of school-based mental health services.

Developing a National Agenda

Symposium participants worked in cross-discipline teams to shape a national agenda to improve educational outcomes for youth and raise national awareness about the educational needs of young people in care. Groups:

- Developed a collective understanding and a shared vision regarding the educational needs of youth in foster care;
- Made recommendations about the resources needed to move practice and policy forward;
- Made recommendations about collaborations that need to be built to improve practice and policy at the national, state, and local levels; and
- Made recommendations about strategies for organizations at all levels to advance the national agenda.

Shared Vision

The workgroups envisioned a future in which youth in care are supported in reaching their optimal educational potential. To become well-rounded individuals who are capable of achieving their goals, children should be provided with comprehensive learning opportunities. They should be supported by coordinated efforts, not just of schools, child welfare agencies, and the courts, but of the many community entities that touch their lives. Child welfare, the judiciary, and education can begin to realize this future by embracing a shared vision that includes the following beliefs:

- All children and youth need a stable and appropriate education. Education should be holistic, encompassing various facets of a child's life including social and recreational development.

- Youth in care should have the same rights and opportunities as all other youth.
- Caseworkers, judges, caregivers, and educators should maintain high expectations for educational achievement of children and youth in care.
- Relationships with the community should be built and used to recruit volunteers, mentors, CASAs, and other empowered adults to advocate for children and youth in care.
- All disciplines should adopt the philosophy and principles of positive youth development (recognizing, valuing, and engaging youth in a respectful way) and encourage youth participation in education planning.
- Each discipline should commit to multisystem capacity building to foster brainstorming for solutions and training across systems.
- All agencies should seek greater accountability to ensure implementation of their mandated responsibilities.
- All systems should strive toward individual attention to the cases of youth in care.

Resources

Each workgroup generated a list of tools, products, and other resources that are necessary to improve the educational outcomes for youth in care. These resources can be grouped in the following categories:

Tools and Information

- Publications that describe best and promising practices;
- State-specific judicial bench books with educational resource directories and information on statutes;
- Judicial checklists of education questions and transition issues;
- Practice and advocacy tools for schools, caregivers, and CASAs;
- Reports of state progress in achieving educational outcomes, as documented in child and family service reviews and court improvement projects;

- Literature reviews of available research; and
- A website resource center for organizing and storing information.

Training

- Ongoing cross-system training on educational issues and youth in care, with the involvement of youth; and
- Training and support of judges, educators, and child welfare staff to promote positive youth development.

Funding

- Secure funding from private, county, state, and federal agencies; and
- Targeted resources to improve educational outcomes for youth in care.

Laws, Regulations, and Related Strategies

- Integratation of statutory and legal requirements to ease implementation across state and local systems;
- Dissemination of information on federal mandates to states about education and child welfare laws;
- Promotion of the use of educational surrogates; and
- Use of lawsuits to spur change.

Collaborative Networks

Collaborative networks can improve practice and policy at the national, state, and local levels. Additional partners that can be engaged to work collaboratively toward improving educational outcomes for youth in care include:

- Community agencies and organizations that are educated about this issue through public awareness campaigns;
- Mentors and tutors for youth in care, recruited from colleges and universities;
- National and state agencies, advocacy groups, governors' commissions, and national resource centers to support education and youth in care;
- Youth in care who advocate for their own rights; and
- Symposium participants sharing information through a listserv.

Collaborative networks should emphasize the inclusion of all relevant parties including youth, caregivers, birthparents, and tribal courts and governments. Organizations do not need to wait to build collaborations before addressing the educational progress of children and youth in care. Existing structures and systems should focus on and provide support for positive educational outcomes for children and youth in the child welfare system.

The workgroups highlighted examples of possible collaborative work, such as the following:

- Development of reciprocal cross-system involvement with nontraditional partners (e.g., organizations working with the disabled, housing/homelessness, or juvenile delinquency);
- Creation of a national advisory board on the educational needs of youth in care to identify the specific roles and responsibilities of each system, review and compile model state training, and conduct reviews of court rules and statutes;
- Formation of a standing committee, convened by the judiciary and including diverse stakeholders, to review educational issues for youth in care;
- Creation of cross-agency panels, including foster and adoptive parents, kinship caregivers, and birthparents, to present and discuss this issue at professional conferences; and
- Joint educational training between law schools and children's rights programs.

Strategies to Promote a National Agenda

Finally, workgroups developed the following strategies for national, state, and local organizations to advance the national agenda:

- Push for the inclusion of educational issues for children and youth in foster care on state and national legislative agendas;
- Make the education of children in foster care a focus of the courts, beginning with the model courts;
- Encourage national child welfare, judicial, and education organizations to collaborate in promoting this agenda;
- Share promising ideas within and between the child welfare, judicial, and education fields;

- Demonstrate effectiveness of programs and practices through outcome data and evaluations;
- Create dialogue on the Internet through the use of a listserv;
- Speak out on the educational needs of youth in care at every venue, to raise awareness;
- Produce effective talking points and data presentations to convey message; and
- Lead with a common vision of improving the educational attainment of youth in care.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The symposium on *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care* provided a unique opportunity to assemble professionals from child welfare, the judiciary, and education to build consensus, draw national attention, and bring a shared commitment to supporting the educational progress of young people in care. Based on the findings of PPCD's and CWLA's surveys, discussions of workgroups from each discipline, and suggestions of cross-discipline workgroups, the following are recommendations for improving the educational outcomes for youth in care:

- Child welfare, education, and the judiciary should make the well-being of youth in care a clear priority and should encourage youth in care to succeed, obtain postsecondary education, and participate in developing their case plans. All disciplines working with youth should adhere to the philosophy and practice the principles of positive youth development.
- Systems should collaborate to improve educational outcomes for youth in care by sharing records, memoranda of understanding, and court orders. Cross-agency partnerships should be developed by engaging leaders and stakeholders from other systems and forming joint committees.
- The education, judicial, and child welfare fields should fulfill their respective responsibilities in ensuring the educational progress of youth in care.
- The education system should facilitate records transfers, provide timely educational assessments, use all school personnel to encourage youth, and include other systems in school settings.

- The judicial system should assume responsibility for overseeing the educational progress of children in care throughout the life of the case, form a model court advisory committee, produce a bench book for judges, and try to maintain each youth in the same school throughout his or her case. Judges should meet regularly with decisionmakers on state and local boards of education.

- The child welfare system should involve families in service delivery, maintain stability in children's lives, and provide courts with accurate educational information. Agencies should reduce caseloads and plan for the transition to independence for all youth. The system should also develop a database of health and education records for children in care.

- Training between and across disciplines should be developed and widely implemented to improve the capacity of the systems to meet the educational needs of youth in care, including information on laws such as the Foster Care Independence Act.

- Advocacy for youth in care should raise awareness about their educational rights and needs. Educational advocacy positions should be created and legislation that supports higher educational attainment for youth should be promoted. Also, a public awareness campaign that increases community awareness of youth in care should be implemented.

- A comprehensive approach that includes resources, tools, and strategies for change should be developed. This includes allocating resources and staff to collaborate with other systems, compiling information on promising practices and programs, and recruiting community volunteers for tutoring.

The systems that are charged with the safety, permanency, and education of youth need to work together to ensure that every youth in care has the opportunity to succeed educationally. Education will be a lifeline as these youth prepare for the developmental tasks of adulthood, sometimes without any stable support or connections. The symposium was an effort to raise the visibility of this issue nationally so that systems change can occur.

To further raise awareness and move toward systems change, CWLA and PPCD will:

- Publish and disseminate products from the Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care project to the child welfare, judicial, and education fields.

- Develop guidelines for communities seeking to improve the educational outcomes of youth in care. The guidelines will include an overview of research in this area; tools and checklists for judges, schools, caregivers, and advocates; and elements of promising programs and initiatives.

This symposium and the *Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Care* project are initial efforts at drawing attention to an issue that will increasingly affect youth, families, and the country as a whole. Youth in care are limited in voicing their needs as a collective group. Therefore, the child welfare, judicial, and education systems must work together to ensure the best possible outcomes for youth in care. All youth in care should have the opportunity and support to realize their potential, have hope for their future, and see their dreams become a reality.

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The Child Welfare League of America and the National Council for Juvenile and Family Court Judges convened a symposium to initiate a dialogue among the child welfare, judicial, and education fields. The experts developed recommendations to support positive educational outcomes for youth in care. This report was made possible by the Marguerite Casey Foundation with technical assistance from Casey Family Programs. It summarizes the results of the symposium, including a survey of experts in child welfare, education, and the judicial system; the creation of a national agenda for the improvement of educational outcomes for youth in care; and examples of programs and practices that may improve youths' educational outcomes.

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